

Boundaries in Relationships



Edward T. Welch

"That car I bought is a real lemon." "The prayers of others have been eagle's wings for me." "You are a lifesaver." These are examples of metaphors. In junior high school, we learned that metaphors are comparisons that omit "like" or "as." "The name of one is substituted for the other."¹ Later we learned that metaphors add vividness to our language. They turn words into pictures. Listen or read carefully and you will find them everywhere. They make written and oral communication engaging.

But don't think of them merely as language ornaments. In Scripture, metaphors reveal deeper realities. For example, Jesus is the Servant, the Son, the Light, the Rock. We are servants, children of God, reflectors of glory, and as a corporate body, the house built on the Rock. These are much more than creative efforts to communicate meaningfully. They are literal. Jesus is the original, and as God's offspring, we are like Him in the way that children share characteristics of their parents. These word images seem less precise than technical theological language such as hypostatic union or supralapsarianism, but careful attention to the development of biblical metaphors is an essential part of theological study.

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In a similar way that metaphors reveal deep structure of Scripture, our personal use of metaphors reveals what we believe. They guide the way we live. Some have argued that metaphors are basic to all thinking: "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."² So listen to a person's metaphors and you will learn about the person.

Notice how metaphors reveal our understanding of relationships. For example, *relationships* can be understood in terms of *war*. Relationships die. Words pierce. People attack, defend, win, lose, fire away, get shot down, and ambush. The war metaphor adds vividness to language and communication, but, even more, it both represents and guides the way we think. For some people, war is a dominant action-guiding metaphor.

Money is another relational metaphor. You invest in a person, give more than you get, get more than you give, borrow from the relationship, and "hit the jackpot" when you find your ideal mate. Choose money as your own dominant life metaphor in contrast to a metaphor such as "relationships are washing another person's feet" and it will significantly

¹ G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1980), p. 152.

² G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Un. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 3.

affect how you live. Behind most communication is an implicit or explicit metaphor and that metaphor can be a visual summary of our deeply held beliefs. Our task is to consider the metaphors implicit in our thinking and increasingly allow biblical images to take hold.

Of the many biblical metaphors applied to individuals and relationships, consider this one in particular: relationships consist of boundaries. People set limits. They own what belongs to them but not what doesn't. "You stay on your side of the fence and I will stay on mine."

The occasion for highlighting this particular metaphor is the *Boundary* series by Christian psychologists, Henry Cloud and John Townsend. After their highly popular book, *Boundaries*, they continued with *Boundaries in Marriage*, *Boundaries in Dating*, and *Boundaries with Kids*. The practical focus of the authors' interest in boundaries is our seeming inability to say no. As a result, we can be overcommitted, our children can be out-of-control and feel entitled, and we become doormats, albeit angry ones.³

Everyone agrees that we *should*, at times, say no, but we don't. The question is, how prominent should this metaphor be in our relationships? In the *Boundaries* literature, the metaphor becomes a ruling one. It becomes a lens through which we see everything in relationships. For example, the book suggests that four different personality styles develop: compliant, controller, nonresponsive, or avoidant. Problems in discerning boundaries cause each of these problems.

The *Boundary* series contains biblical references throughout as a means to illustrate Scripture's emphasis on boundaries, but psychological theory seems to be the basic reason that this metaphor receives attention. Theory and practice always join. In this case, the theory is the psychological construct of separation-individuation. This developmental theory assumes that the critical task of childhood is to develop an identity separate from others, and only nurtured and affirmed

children can establish a clear sense of "me" and "not-me."⁴ With this developmental scheme as a starting point, the boundaries imagery naturally becomes a dominant interpretive grid for all of life.

Like most psychological theories, *Boundaries* has kernels of reliable observation, otherwise a theory would garner no interest whatsoever. But Scripture indicates that there is a much more profound developmental task. That is, how can we grow in wisdom, learn the fear of the Lord, and understand how God intends human life to be lived. At least, we could say that Scripture gives a deeper developmental model.

The popularity of the boundaries image is an opportunity to consider its usefulness and limitations. Is it a ruling metaphor for relationships, or have some people emphasized it to the detriment of other more primary images? The purpose here is not to evaluate each application of the boundaries metaphor, or present a lengthy discussion of the limitation of the separation-individuation model. Instead, the goal is to explore the use of this biblical metaphor, consider its limitations as a ruling theme in relationships, and review the practical application of adopting it.

Boundaries in the Old Testament

Old Testament scholar, Bruce Waltke, observes, "Boundaries are important in both the created and social orders. When everything keeps to its allotted place and does not transgress its limits, there is order, not chaos."⁵ This observation is undeniable. God separated the light from the darkness, the water from the land, and humans from subhuman creatures. Within human relationships a kind of boundary distinguishes male from female, and God expresses an interest throughout Scripture in maintaining this distinction. But the emphasis in Genesis is just as much on "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24) as it is on the distinction between male and female. With the entrance of sin, boundaries (distinctions, separation) become a dominant metaphor for destructive relationships.

⁴ *Boundaries*, p. 66.

⁵ B. Waltke with C. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 56.

³ H. Cloud and J. Townsend, *Boundaries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 59.

As a way to express the differences between ourselves as creatures and God as Creator, God drew a boundary line in the Garden. "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17). God's law is a boundary. Sin is a violation of a boundary that God has established. It is a transgression. It is explicit disobedience. It is a lack of respect for the lines God has established.

Along with transgressing divinely appointed boundaries, we also erect boundaries between God and ourselves. We stiff-arm the Lord and prefer to establish a parallel kingdom where we devise our own edicts. God's response is two-fold. Most prominently, He intrudes. He violates the boundaries we establish and offers forgiveness for the ones we have violated. He moves toward us with warnings as He asserts His own Lordship.

Yet God, at times, gives us what we want. We want our own separate God-less kingdom; He lets us experience such isolation. God *created* boundaries in the subhuman kingdom

personal relationships will be replete with boundary images. For example, in the Genesis account sin is immediately followed by fig leaves—the first real boundary between male and female (Gen. 3:7). Then jealousy, anger, and finally, murder separate brothers (Gen. 4:8). The consequence of this effort to be autonomous feudal lords is fitting: Cain is essentially barred from regular human companionship. He receives what he wanted and the misery associated with such a course. He experienced the logical consequences of jealousy and murderous actions against other people.

The metaphor gathers even more momentum after Cain's sin. God separates—or puts boundaries between—the righteous and the unrighteous (Gen. 6:1-8). Abraham is set apart from his family and directed to live in a new land (Gen. 12:1). The Levites are set apart from the other Israelites (Num. 8:14). The Israelite people are eventually cast outside the boundaries of their God-given territory,

The world of sin, indeed, is a world of boundaries, walls, and separation.

before the fall, and he *imposed* them on His image bearers after it. The human-divine relationship begins with sweet fellowship and unity in the garden, but sin causes separation from God and expulsion from Eden even to the point of God directing an armed cherubim to guard the border. This sets the tone for the entire Old Testament.

During the Exodus, when God comes near and establishes a people for Himself, His dwelling has very distinct boundaries. If any uninvited person touched the mountain when God was present, he or she would immediately die. Similarly, when God dwelled with His people, the Holy of Holies was partitioned off with one barrier after another. If you were a Gentile, the situation was worse. "At one time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

Since our relationship with God is mirrored in our relationships with people, our

scattered among the nations (Deut. 4:27).

The boundaries between Israel and the surrounding nations were, by God's command, intended to be nearly impenetrable. The purpose was to keep idolatry and syncretistic practices outside the camp. God's chosen people were never to intermarry or make treaties with surrounding nations. Instead, they were to drive out all the nations that occupied the Promised Land (Deut. 7:2, 3). By New Testament times, it was a serious boundary breach for a Jew even to eat with Gentiles.

The world of sin, indeed, is a world of boundaries, walls, and separation. C.S. Lewis even offers it as a metaphor for hell. Hell, he suggests, will be like a sprawling suburb where everyone has high fences and people move farther and farther away from each other.⁶ Although we might also opt for other biblical images of hell, Lewis is correct. Satan is a divider

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: MacMillan, 1946).

and isolating walls give evidence of his work.

Boundaries, as a biblical metaphor, dominate the Old Testament. It appears at creation, but this image becomes a dominant metaphor as a result of sin. Because of its close ties with the Fall, it is not intended to be a prescriptive guide for life. In other words, we should not expect that the Christian life is intended to be characterized as one barrier after another. Instead, the image of boundaries *describes* life in a fallen world more than *prescribes* it. As a description it visualizes something we all experience. Boundaries are deeply familiar to us. Images of people wearing masks—a kind of boundary—suggests that we want to erect boundaries. The quest for authenticity suggests that we feel constrained by boundaries. And the desire for personal connection suggests that we hope for the day when we have more open borders and can know and be known.

Boundaries in the New Testament

Robert Frost quotes his New England neighbor's persistent refrain, "Good fences make good neighbors." But, contrary to the individualistic spirit of the day, and in tune with a desire to breach partitions in relationships, he counters, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall,"⁷ and in this he faintly echoes the gospel. Separation is an essential feature of the fallen order; union is an essential feature of the gospel.

Jesus breaks one boundary after another so we can live without the claustrophobic walls that comprise our solitary prison cells. He broke the wall between creature and Creator by becoming like us. He called disciples to stay with Him. He invited people to come near. Those with faith knew that He invited us even to touch Him (Luke 7:25-38, 8:43-48). He violated the cultural boundaries of the day by moving toward women, the poor, the oppressed, the diseased, those who died, and the demonized. He invites us to live *in* Him, as a branch in the vine (John 15). He assures us of His ongoing presence by the Spirit (John 16). And, as He approached His death, He prayed that we—the church—would be united with

both Himself and each other in such a way that this unifying love would be God's testimony of Himself to the world.

I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one: I in them and You in Me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You have sent Me and loved them even as You have loved Me (John 17:20-23).

The book of Ephesians takes up this theme in earnest. The letter is essentially a sermon on John 17.

For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two [Jews and Gentiles] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility . . . His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two (Eph. 2:14, 15).

The Apostle, after grounding his teaching in Jesus' High Priestly prayer, discusses such practical applications of our unity as respecting the gifts of others, speaking truth and wholesome words, putting aside division, and being kind, compassionate, and forgiving. Such unity does not come easily, but since the Spirit has come, Paul has confidence that the church will grow in it to the point where it will even be astonishing to spiritual beings who observe the church (Eph. 3:10). It will be a city without walls.

The gospel of John and the letter to the Ephesians introduce a new epoch in which barriers are broken down. Their focus, however, is the church. Unity and love might supercede the image of boundaries within the church, but what of the church's relationship with the world? Are boundaries intended to be guiding metaphors in those relationships?

Since everything is changed by the coming of Christ, it isn't surprising that the protective boundaries of the Old Testament give way to expansive missionary infiltration in the New Testament. Jesus first announced that He was the Messiah to an outsider, a Samaritan woman (John 4). He healed the servant of a Roman

⁷ "Mending Wall" in *Robert Frost's Poems* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969), pp. 94, 95.

Centurion and praised his faith (Matt. 8:10). And He commanded Peter to violate the Jewish taboo against eating with Gentiles by going to Cornelius' house, thereby announcing the kingdom to the Gentiles.

Whereas going out into the world was a curse on the Old Testament Jew, it was a command to the New Testament Christian (Matt. 28:19). God's people are sent-out ones—salt and light to the world (Matt. 5:13)—and leaven that permeates the entire loaf (Luke 13:20). Boundaries, once intended to protect people from neighboring idolatry, have been torn down. Now, rather than protecting ourselves, we invite neighbors and strangers to know the One who breaks barriers. God's people were once liberated from Egypt, now they are called to go back to it and proclaim

for others, but they can't resist attending to and emphasizing our personal desires and interest in self-protection. Simply put, we set boundaries because *we* feel violated. No matter how much we nuance the metaphor, it doesn't capture the ethos of the New Testament, which is less concerned about personal violation and more interested in persevering as we endure hardship for the sake of the gospel. At best, we could say that boundaries is one metaphor among many, and, given its lack of prominence in the New Testament, to use it as the primary image is to ask too much of it. If we are going to fall in love with one metaphor, we should choose images such as the kingdom of heaven, abiding in the vine, oneness, or living as humble servants—pictures more central to New Testament thought.

Boundaries, therefore, are not intended to be a dominant, life-guiding metaphor for relationships. Instead, *breaking* relational boundaries is fundamental to life in Christ.

liberation to their one-time oppressors who don't even know they are separated from God by prison walls. The reason these boundaries have been breached is that Jesus now reigns, He has given authority to His people, and the Spirit is with us.

Breaking Boundaries More Than Erecting Them

Boundaries, therefore, are not intended to be a dominant, life-guiding metaphor for relationships. Instead, *breaking* relational boundaries is fundamental to life in Christ. Christians consider how to move toward others and surprise them with love. We reconcile, forgive, cover offenses. We *repent* of the personal boundaries we instinctively erect, and we pray for deeper insight into our oneness, as we are one body with Christ as the head. The zeal for unity and the tearing down of interpersonal boundaries are distinguishing marks of the church.

If boundaries are a life-guiding image then our attention will boomerang back on ourselves. The *Boundaries* books speak of love and respect

Reframing the Questions Commonly Answered by Boundaries

Then how do we address the many questions that the boundaries metaphor seems so adept at answering? For example, how else can we guide someone whose life seems dominated by intrusive and self-centered people? What about those who are always being taken advantage of? There are common relational difficulties in which the boundaries metaphor seems to provide useful wisdom, and where at first glance, the images of self-giving, oneness, and unity seem impractical.

Cloud and Townsend begin *Boundaries* with a case study that applies to most busy, middle-class women and many men. Sherrie is a thoroughly exhausted, thirty-five-year-old wife of a distant husband, mother of two active elementary children, daughter of an intrusive mother, full-time worker whose boss passes his work on to her and takes all the credit for a job well done, and active church member (who is carrying a few extra pounds). While trying to deny herself and to love others, she has lost her joy, hope, and feelings of love. Paradoxically,

she feels isolated and alone.

Cloud and Townsend indicate that "Sherrie has great difficulty in knowing what things are her responsibility and what *aren't*. In her desire to do the right thing, or to avoid conflict, she ends up taking on problems that God never intended her to take on."⁸ Her task is to establish clear boundaries in each of these relationships.

Why do I always say Yes? There is something of Sherri in most of us. Why do we say Yes even though we would rather say No?

Over-committed people are the life-blood of the church. Those who say Yes to one thing will be asked to do five others until life feels like a race from one obligation to the next. One way to approach this is to set personal boundaries by saying No and taking control of your life. But since the weight of Scripture doesn't recommend boundaries as the first biblical image to consider, we would expect there to be other biblical alternatives.

command to love. For example, love does not always mean self-sacrifice. Although that is one expression of love, love can also mean getting a babysitter when your children are asking you to stay home rather than going out for a date with your spouse. Love can mean *not* giving money to someone who needs it. Love and wisdom can mean saying No to service opportunities.

- We don't want to disappoint others. Many of us want to please other people and not disappoint them. This is good and normal. However, the desire can quickly run amok and become an idolatrous desire in which our goal is to never disappoint. When our hearts are set on this, the other-oriented command to love is revised so that it becomes a self-oriented goal to never disappoint, to always have people pleased with you, to never have conflict. What seems like a desire to not disappoint can mask the idolatrous desire to have everyone

Why do I always say yes?

The boundaries image suggests that the problem is coming from outside us. Indeed, problems, expectations, and demands can come *at* us. But Scripture emphasizes those problems that come *out* of us. As such, first consider the motivation behind Yes-saying.

- We have not been taught about biblical priorities. A biblically-shaped week includes prayer, opportunities to meditate on Scripture, work, service, relationships, and rest. If one of these is continually being neglected, there are probably places where we must say No. The reality is that God has both ordained the essential components of our lives and has authored the twenty-four-hour day in which we can incorporate those components.
- We are not seeking counsel. When struggling and stuck, wise people seek the counsel of others. Other people can reorient us to what is most important, and they can offer creative ideas on how to apply the

be pleased with us. Is the emphasis on "loving another person" or is it on "being loved by another person?" This is a precarious balancing act, but the goal of followers of Christ is to love others more than *need* love from others. Of course, this moves us to the deeper question of our relationship with God: Does being loved by this person become the center of your life, replacing God Himself?

- We worship our own reputation. The first step out of such a dilemma is repentance.
- We overestimate our own importance and underestimate God's care for His people and His church. We live as if we existed alone, frantically putting one finger in the dike just when another leak appears. At root, we don't believe that the enthroned God loves His people and will certainly accomplish His good purposes.
- We overestimate our own importance and underestimate the gifts that God has given to others. God determined that He would accomplish His purposes through the

⁸ *Boundaries*, p.25.

corporate body. In other words, one expression of faith is that it asks for help because it knows that we are limited creatures and it delights in the fact that God has liberally given many gifts to the church.

The over-extended, Yes-saying, people-pleaser is a prime candidate for adopting the boundaries metaphor, but more obvious biblical teachings apply. The knowledge of God revealed in Christ, repentance, and faith expressing itself in love are the basics of the Christian life. When in doubt we want to consider our struggles in light of these. In the case of having said one Yes too many, these fundamental teachings have extensive application.

Love and discernment are the constituent parts of wisdom. Together they answer most of the questions that the *Boundaries* series raise, and they keep us much closer to the gospel and the two great commandments, to love God and love neighbor.

What do I do when someone calls me at least weekly at 1:00 A.M.? If you are ministering to people, you have probably received some late-night phone calls. You could let the answering machine take the call, but what if it's a family emergency? Caller ID costs extra though it might reveal that the caller is someone you would rather not speak with, but what if that person is in a real emergency?

When you pick up the phone, it is a struggling person who occasionally attends your church. This is their weekly, late-night call. It is the perfect opportunity to invoke boundaries.

"I'm trying to sleep. Call me on Saturday morning. Goodbye."

But, instead of thinking, "How can I erect boundaries in this relationship?" think, "How should I wisely love this person?" and "What is my calling? What are my priorities?"

The challenge of love, of course, is that it is so multi-faceted. It runs the gamut from taking a bullet for someone to kicking them out of your house. Sometimes you bear someone's burden and sometimes you encourage them as they bear their burden. Therefore, by emphasizing love over boundaries we haven't really simplified our decision, just refocused it. We may have to defer some decisions until we can seek the counsel of others. But, meanwhile,

there is a person on the other end of the telephone line.

When love and discernment merge, there are a number of options.

- At 1:00 A.M., we might not be able to think clearly about anything, so we could ask the person to call back during the day. We are creatures with limitations and we need sleep, and we may be unable to serve effectively at that late hour.
- We might determine that the person's situation is so dire that love means taking the late night phone call and enduring the fatigue that comes the next morning. But, if it is a regular habit, we will seek counsel from others.
- In order to teach the struggling person how to grow in Christ, we could ask them to pray, read, and write their questions as a way to learn how to call out to the Lord rather than instinctively depend first on other people. Then we could consider those questions between 8:00 A.M. and 10:00 P.M.
- Since love means knowing others, you could ask what the person *really* wants and why he or she calls at such odd hours. Serving others can mean helping them to see their own motives.
- If the person isn't in danger, you could tell them that, in the future, the answering machine will get the message. The biblical direction on this is not so much boundaries as wisdom and discerning God's priorities. In other words, you know that a late night phone call will disrupt sleep and leave you groggy for the next day, and when you consider God's calling in your life, it would be unwise stewardship to take the phone call.
- Is there a place to confront the caller about selfishness? Certainly. Friends who love are willing to say the hard things that other's won't. But you want to have good evidence for it, and you want to do it for the caller's sake more than your own.

Could someone say that you have just erected wise personal boundaries? Perhaps, but

the metaphor is not what supplied direction. It was the call to love wisely. Under this heading we are naturally drawn to how Christ has loved us and how we, in turn, can love others.

My life is filled with unhealthy relationships. What should I do? Unhealthy relationships are another category where boundaries imagery prevails. Consider a relationship where someone wants to be your friend but you don't want to reciprocate.

Creating busyness is one way to avoid the relationship. Overt lies are another. They are boundaries, but dishonest ones. Instead of these knee-jerk responses, we would begin by considering our own hearts. "Why don't I love?" "How is this person divinely-appointed to reveal my own selfishness?" Love is willing to look at our own hearts first when there is trouble in a relationship.

relationship, and then seek discipling from others to grow in the areas in which we are vulnerable.

What if my spouse is abusive? Abuse creates another occasion suited to the boundaries metaphor. Since in popular usage the word has a broad range of meaning, consider three: physical violence, emotional hurt, and manipulation.

If abuse means physical violence, then boundaries is the operative metaphor. We call police, provide a safe place for the woman, suggest that she initiate a protection from abuse order, and do whatever else is necessary to protect her. God loathes the violence of oppressors, and we should as well. It is sad to have to establish such a boundary, because it is erected as a result of sin, but it is also honoring to the God who values life and exhorts us to

My life is filled with unhealthy relationships. What should I do?

If the person has a history of exhausting other people, we then might consider what, if anything, the other person does that pushes people away. For example, some people wear out friends with their constant grumbling and complaining, their frequent discussion about their problems but unwillingness to heed advice, their frequent rebukes to others for not being better friends, or their demands for inordinate amounts of time. To raise issues such as these cannot be done casually. In fact, in can't be done apart from a relationship with the person.

"Unhealthy" sometimes means inconvenient. And while it is true that there is only room for a limited number of close friends in our lives, and an offer of a friendship doesn't obligate us to reciprocate in the way a person might want, a relationship that is inconvenient is an opportunity for us to examine our own hearts and seek what God has for us to do.

Unhealthy relationships can sometimes mean relationships that induce us to sin. Of course, when confronted with sin, boundaries are always one of the operative metaphors. If we believe that our faith is weak and the temptation strong, wisdom indicates that we should, after some explanation, avoid the

show respect to all.

Love, however, remains the overarching metaphor. It is the reason why you establish a barrier. Love says No to evil. When possible, it puts limits around sin and its consequences. Yet, the goal is to bless enemies and lead them to repentance (Rom.12:14-21).

Abuse can also refer to mistreatment that is emotionally rather than physically hurtful: a spouse's anger, manipulative schemes, or reckless and hurtful words. In these situations, love assumes priority again.

"Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt" (Lev. 19:17). This is love. How to rebuke, and who you might have present with you when you rebuke once again are decisions that require wisdom.

Sometimes we describe abuse as any attempt by others to manipulate us. In these situations love means that we will again consider our own hearts before we examine others (Matt.7:3-5). How are our hearts no different than that of the accused? In what ways are we eager to get others to do our agenda?

The classic illustration is the intrusive mother or mother-in-law who uses guilt to get

her way. The spoiled child is another. After we consider ourselves, notice how love and discernment render manipulation harmless. We are easily manipulated if we are more concerned about getting something from someone—their favorable opinion, their help, their love—than we are about loving them. When our questions are, "What is the best way to love this person, and what is lovingly wise in this situation?" attempts at manipulation fail.

Can I talk about my needs in a relationship? What if a husband has a habit that annoys his wife? Or what if a wife feels neglected and unloved? One response would be to emphasize submission and silently endure and pray; another would be to emphasize boundaries and take a stand, with firmness and clarity, by rebuking the husband.

Unity and love, however, offer another path. It emphasizes "we."

"Bill, there is something I want to talk about together. It isn't a big deal, but there are

At first glance, the call to love seems inadequate for these questions because our version of love is that it is passive, relatively quiet, and sacrifices our own desires in favor of the desires of others. It covers offenses and patiently bears with the weaknesses and sins of others. These are, indeed, features of love, but they are not its totality. Love also rebukes, warns, and doesn't always bail out the guilty person even though such a decision may be much more painful than paying the price. Love means making your preferences known when you are in a close relationship. Anything else would be different than what you really want. That is, we want relationships with real people who are not the same as ourselves. Although we can joke about wanting to marry our clones, God's good design is that we relate deeply with someone who is not like ourselves.

Close friends and spouses take our lead from the way the living God relates to us in that He knows us and is known by us. He invites us

Can I talk about my needs in a relationship?

times I have reactions to the way you eat. I'm not sure what we can do about it, but I, at least, want to talk with you about it rather than brood."

"Bill, I have been concerned about our relationship over the past few months. You seem distant. When I talk to you, you seem to be somewhere else. Have I done anything offensive? Could we talk about how we can continue to grow together?"

At this point, the boundaries metaphor flounders. It can think in terms of "yours" and "mine," but it has a hard time getting to "we."

These are just a few of the illustrations for which boundaries are invoked. The boundaries books mention many others.

Can I say no to my husband when he wants to have sex?

Can I ask for what I desire in Christian relationships?

What if a co-worker is making obvious sexual advances?

What should I do when my teenager is coming home drunk?

to share our desires with Him. To avoid such richness in relationship, where we know and are known, is typically a consequence of such an emphasis, however, reveals more about us than Scripture. If passivity is our focus, we probably reveal our disdain for candor and our lack of love for the other person.

Walk in Wisdom, Don't Erect Boundaries

A popular saying goes something like this: for every complex question there is a simple—but wrong—answer. There is, of course, truth to the adage. We are prone to giving simplistic answers, especially when we don't understand the complexity of someone's life. But here is the caveat for biblical counselors: we try to offer simple truths to complex problems in a way that is increasingly wise.

The need for wisdom implies that we face difficult questions, and the specific application of simple answers demands careful and prayerful thought. For example, sometimes you answer a foolish person, sometimes you don't (Prov. 26:4,5). Sometimes you cover an offense,

sometimes you speak out (Prov. 17:9, 27:5). What should you do? The answer, of course, is "it depends." You begin with the fear of the Lord, you learn from similar situations, you get the counsel of others, you keep checking your own heart and its motives, you remember your limitations, you rehearse the law of love, you recognize that keeping everyone happy is impossible, but there are ways you can speak that encourage conciliation, mutual understanding and unity, and so on. These are just a handful of the features of wisdom.

The Sherrie case study cited at the beginning of *Boundaries* can be answered by way of Scripture's basic directives such as trust, repent, and love. The pastoral challenge is to

sermons every Sunday. It means that sometimes our answer will be, "I don't know." But such lack of insight doesn't lead us to despair. Instead, it leads to prayer, careful thought, working together, and learning from others.

The boundaries metaphor has both a positive and a negative sense. Scripture offers a positive metaphor—we erect barriers between ourselves and areas of temptation, and we maintain boundaries when there are questions about physical safety. In extreme situations, we "do not cast your pearls before swine" (Matt. 7:6) and "expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Cor. 5:13). You can find these in Scripture but we must be very careful when we use them. Rather than being a dominant

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lead Sherrie in a way that helps her to see where she needs to repent, how she can know Christ in a way that her trust will be fruitful, and what love looks like in her frantic and lonely life. To quickly prescribe repentance, faith, and love without fitting them carefully into her life would leave her feeling misunderstood and without direction.

Sherrie raises difficult questions. Their difficulty doesn't mean that we must move to the less prominent metaphors of Scripture. It means that we must labor to meaningfully apply the basic biblical themes that appear in most

metaphor of Scripture, it is a minor one that we invoke when there is physical danger. We should seek counsel when we are considering it as an operative metaphor.

But there is a negative sense to boundaries in that they are proscribed rather than prescribed. When boundaries become a lifestyle, we are going to think about self-protection more than love. The overarching image is that we should break down boundaries between ourselves and others rather than erect them.